



Visit our website for other free publication  
downloads

<http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/>

[To rate this publication click here.](#)



# CATEGORICAL CONFUSION? THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF RECOGNIZING CHALLENGES EITHER AS IRREGULAR OR TRADITIONAL

---

Colin S. Gray

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>FEB 2012</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2012 to 00-00-2012</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 632 Wright Avenue, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5244</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>74</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

# STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE



The Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) is part of the U.S. Army War College and is the strategic-level study agent for issues related to national security and military strategy with emphasis on geostrategic analysis.

The mission of SSI is to use independent analysis to conduct strategic studies that develop policy recommendations on:

- Strategy, planning, and policy for joint and combined employment of military forces;
- Regional strategic appraisals;
- The nature of land warfare;
- Matters affecting the Army's future;
- The concepts, philosophy, and theory of strategy; and
- Other issues of importance to the leadership of the Army.

Studies produced by civilian and military analysts concern topics having strategic implications for the Army, the Department of Defense, and the larger national security community.

In addition to its studies, SSI publishes special reports on topics of special or immediate interest. These include edited proceedings of conferences and topically-oriented roundtables, expanded trip reports, and quick-reaction responses to senior Army leaders.

The Institute provides a valuable analytical capability within the Army to address strategic and other issues in support of Army participation in national security policy formulation.

## **Strategic Studies Institute Monograph**

# **CATEGORICAL CONFUSION? THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF RECOGNIZING CHALLENGES EITHER AS IRREGULAR OR TRADITIONAL**

**Colin S. Gray**

**February 2012**

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. Authors of Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) publications enjoy full academic freedom, provided they do not disclose classified information, jeopardize operations security, or misrepresent official U.S. policy. Such academic freedom empowers them to offer new and sometimes controversial perspectives in the interest of furthering debate on key issues. This report is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

\*\*\*\*\*

This publication is subject to Title 17, United States Code, Sections 101 and 105. It is in the public domain and may not be copyrighted.

\*\*\*\*\*

Comments pertaining to this report are invited and should be forwarded to: Director, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 45 Ashburn Drive, Bldg. 47, Carlisle, PA 17013-5046.

\*\*\*\*\*

All Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) publications may be downloaded free of charge from the SSI website. Hard copies of this report may also be obtained free of charge while supplies last by placing an order on the SSI website. SSI publications may be quoted or reprinted in part or in full with permission and appropriate credit given to the U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA. Contact SSI by visiting our website at the following address: *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil*.

\*\*\*\*\*

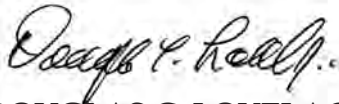
The Strategic Studies Institute publishes a monthly e-mail newsletter to update the national security community on the research of our analysts, recent and forthcoming publications, and upcoming conferences sponsored by the Institute. Each newsletter also provides a strategic commentary by one of our research analysts. If you are interested in receiving this newsletter, please subscribe on the SSI website at *www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/newsletter/*.

ISBN 1-58487-520-8

## FOREWORD

Strategic theory is necessary and should be useful, which is just as well because it is also unavoidable. Practical problem-solving soldiers “do” theory when they design plans that explain how particular means and ways should achieve the desired and intended results. But, like medicine, theory is not always beneficial. The long familiar division of American security challenges and threats into two categories, irregular or traditional (regular), is seriously misleading empirically. However, alternative efforts at categorization (e.g., adding a hybrid category), are not a significant improvement.

In this monograph, Dr. Colin Gray argues that assertions of categories of challenge do more harm than benefit to American strategic understanding. He posits that the conceptual approach least prone to wreak damage on our grasp of the problems of the day is to abandon broad categorization altogether. Instead, he finds and advises that the general theory of strategy (and of war and warfare) should be regarded as authoritative over all challenging episodes, while only foundational recognition allows safely for case-specific strategic theory and practice.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

COLIN S. GRAY is Professor of International Politics and Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, England. He worked at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (London) and at Hudson Institution (Croton-on-Hudson, NY) before founding the National Institute for Public Policy, a defense-oriented think tank in the Washington, DC, area. Dr. Gray served for 5 years in the Reagan administration on the President's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament. He has served as an adviser to both the U.S. and British governments (he has dual citizenship). His government work has included studies of nuclear strategy, arms control, maritime strategy, space strategy, and the use of special forces. Dr. Gray has written 24 books, including: *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004); *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005); *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2006); *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace, and Strategy* (Potomac Books, 2009); *National Security Dilemmas: Challenges and Opportunities* (Potomac Books, 2009); *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010); and *War, Peace, and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, 2nd Ed. (Routledge, 2011). His next book will be *Airpower for Strategic Effect*. Dr. Gray is a graduate of the Universities of Manchester and Oxford.





## SUMMARY

Strategic concepts and the theories they encourage and enable are discretionary intellectual constructions. Strategic concepts are not dictated to us; rather, we choose them and decide how they can serve as building blocks for the edifice of theory we prefer. When strategic theory is confusing, misleading, and not fit for its practical purposes of education and even advice, then it is akin to bad medicine that we take in the mistaken belief that it will do us good. Unfortunately, it is necessary to alert Americans to the inadvertent self-harm they are causing themselves by the poor ways in which they choose to conceptualize strategic behavior.

A quadripartite argument serves to summarize both what is causing confusion, and how much of the damage can be undone and prevented from recurring. First, it is an error amply demonstrated by historical evidence to divide challenges, threats, war, and warfare into two broad, but exclusive categories—irregular and traditional (regular, conventional). The problems with this binary scheme are both logical and historical-empirical. Challenges and wars tend not to follow the optional purity of strictly irregular or traditional characteristics.

Second, it is not a notable advance to add a third arguably exclusive category, hybrid, to the now long-standing two. The hybrid concept is useful in that it alerts people to the phenomena of strategic occurrences and episodes that have mixed-species parentage, but on reflection this is a rather simple recognition of what has been a familiar feature of strategic history universally and forever. Strategic big-game hunters who sally forth boldly in search of hybrid beasts of

war can be certain to find them. But having found them, the most classic of strategists' questions begs in vain for a useful answer. The question is "so what?" while the answer does not appear to be very useful.

Third, by analogy with systems analysis in contrast with operations research, the wrong question inexorably invites answers that are not fit for the real purpose of theory. The right question is not, "How should we categorize the wide variety of strategic phenomena that may be challenges and threats?" Instead, the question ought to be, "Should we categorize strategic challenges at all?" The most persuasive answer is that we should not conceptually categorize challenges and threats beyond their generic identification as menaces (and some opportunities). The general theory of strategy provides the high-level conceptual guidance that we need in order to tailor our strategic behavior to the specific case at issue.

Fourth, our strategies for coping with particular challenges will be effective only if they are conceived and implemented in the context of the authority of strategy's general theory. They should not be designed to fit within the conceptual categorical cages of irregular, traditional, or hybrid (*inter alia*) theories. When considering the American need to be ready to meet, or choose not to meet, what may be challenges and threats, it is important to appreciate the saliency of these caveats: (1) the identification of phenomena as challenges (threats or opportunities) unavoidably requires substantial guesswork—when is a challenge/threat not a challenge/threat; (2) the rank-ordering and prioritization of challenges is more an art than a science, even a social science; (3) challenge labeling by exclusive categories frequently harms understanding; and, (4) the United States should not gratuitously sur-

render political and strategic discretion by bounding its challenge-spotting needlessly with self-constructed intellectual barriers that by implication narrow the range of appropriate U.S. response choices.

Careful consideration of the categorization of challenges yields the following conclusions and recommendations, both explicit and implicit:

1. Clarity and logical integrity in the definition of key concepts is vital. Both elements are necessary — one does not want to be clearly wrong.

2. Definitional encyclopedism should be resisted. Efforts to be fully inclusive are well-intentioned, but almost always a mistake. Typically, more is less.

3. Ideas matter, because they help educate for action. Strategy is a practical endeavor, which is why strategic theorizing ultimately is only about strategic practice.

4. The general theory of strategy (and of war, and statecraft) so educates practitioners that they should be fit enough to craft and execute specific strategies designed to meet particular strategic historical challenges.

5. The categorization of challenges and threats is regrettable, but the damage that it might promote can be reduced and limited if it is done in the authoritative context of general strategic theory.

6. A major practical reason to resist the temptation to categorize challenges is that the effect of such conceptual all-but enculturation is to encourage us to respond “in category” — which must involve some gratuitous surrender of the initiative on our part.



# **CATEGORICAL CONFUSION? THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF RECOGNIZING CHALLENGES EITHER AS IRREGULAR OR TRADITIONAL**

Theory should cast a steady light on all phenomena so that we can more easily recognize and eliminate the weeds that always spring from ignorance; it should show how one thing is related to another, and keep the important and the unimportant separate.

Carl von Clausewitz, 1832-4; 1976<sup>1</sup>

Curiously, among the various characteristics scholars have postulated as belonging to American strategic culture or way of war, one in particular has been overlooked, the American penchant for theorizing when it comes to military affairs.

Antulio J. Echevarria II, 2011<sup>2</sup>

Confronted with tactics radically different from our own standard tactics, analysts created a new category, “irregular warfare,” to describe the security challenge we face. In creating a new category, they created more conceptual mischief than they resolved. “Irregular warfare” as a term conflates tactical asymmetry with strategic difference. While the tactics employed by the belligerents may be different, the strategic objective is the same.

W. Alexander Vacca and  
Mark Davidson, 2011<sup>3</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION AND ARGUMENT**

Much of what passes for American strategic thinking today is a confused jumble of briefly fashionable buzzwords of uncertain authority or merit. This con-

fusion of ideas rests and is promoted by a confusion of alleged categories of wars and types of warfare. In a widely praised book published in 2007, Brian McAllister Linn offers the following uncompromisingly negative judgment on the conceptual health of recent and current defense debate.

Even before GWOT [Global War on Terror], the defense community was in the midst of a vibrant debate over whether the nature of war itself had changed. Advocates offered the prospect of a glittering future through a “Revolution in Military Affairs,” “Military Transformation,” and a “New American Way of War.” But their voices were only some, if perhaps the most strident, in a much larger discussion. Others defended the relevance of military philosophers such as Henri Jomini and Carl von Clausewitz, while still others advocated what General Wesley K. Clark termed “modern war” — limited, carefully constrained in geography, scope, weaponry, and effects. The debate, like the defense community, overflowed with buzzwords — asymmetric conflict, fourth-generation warfare, shock and awe, full spectrum dominance — many of which quickly became passé. And with some significant exceptions, much of this debate confined itself to the relative merits of weapons systems, and to new tactical organizations.

This failure of military intellectuals to agree on a concept of war might seem surprising, given that virtually everyone in the armed forces claims to be a “warfighter” and every few years at least one of the services proclaims its intention to make each member a “warrior.”<sup>4</sup>

So much for the bad news that Linn delivers persuasively. Fortunately, the bad news of concept failure can be retired as yesterday’s headline, because this

failure, though serious, can be readily corrected. At least, that ought to be true, should key opinion leaders prove re-educable. The twin purposes of this monograph are to diagnose the, or at least a, sufficient cause of America's contemporary conceptual confusion, and to move on and identify a no-less-sufficient solution. My argument is summarized in the following four linked propositions:

1. It is a mistake to categorize challenges, wars, or warfare as being either irregular or traditional (regular). The error is both conceptual and empirical, and it has far-reaching harmful consequences.

2. Having committed the original sin of the simple binary categorical distinction between irregular and traditional challenges, wars, or warfare, the error is magnified by the consequential elaborate theorization devoted exclusively to the false categories.

3. The one truly fatal error that reduces strategic conceptualization to the chaotic state of ungoverned, indeed ungovernable, intellectual space is the failure to recognize the conceptual authority of the single general theory of strategy over all strategic phenomena, no matter the preferred choice in categorization. The unified general theory of strategy is mature and by and large accepted to a degree far beyond the general theories of statecraft and of war (and peace), and commands understanding of the field.<sup>5</sup> Different wars may be perceived to be of different kinds, but they are *all* of them different kinds.

4. There is an essential unity to all of strategic history, which is to say of history as it was influenced by the threat or use of force. It is only safe to theorize about perceived subspecies of strategy, war, and warfare, if one is crystal clear on the point that the conceptual context for subspecies theory (for example, to



explain irregular war or counterinsurgency [COIN] warfare) is the theory that provides the understanding for explanation of the whole species. Granular conceptualization and analysis may or may not be wise, but it should never be undertaken in the absence of the clear comprehension that it entails the characterization of phenomena that are “grains” of something else that is much larger, indeed, all-inclusive. What happens when imprudent categorization seems to license creative theory development, is that the new theorization is in fact rogue, because unwittingly it has proceeded ignorant of, or indifferent to, the discipline that should be provided by recognition of the authority of a more inclusive category.

Each of the four elements of the argument just specified is important, as are the connections among them. The skeleton methodological key that opens the door to the clarification that sweeps away confusion could hardly be simpler. It is the simple recognition that in statecraft, war, strategy, and warfare, one is dealing with phenomena that are universal and eternal, and are both singular and plural. It is all too easy to be overwhelmed by one’s ignorance of vital detail about a new development, say, cyberpower, or a local insurgency somewhere that one has difficulty even locating on the map. But it should be of inestimable political and strategic value to know for certain that the novel source of current bafflement already is covered quite robustly by a time-tested, experience-based general theory. Assertions will always be made claiming that “this” event, episode, or capability is different, perhaps radically so, from all that has gone before. What is more, such claims may well be objectively true; assuredly they will be plausible to many people. However, the historical uniqueness in detail of political

events with strategic implications cannot be permitted to obscure their species membership. For example, the differences are stunningly obvious between such episodes in world politics as the rivalries between Britain and Germany before World War I, the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and the United States and China today in the 21st century. But while we must be careful to avoid undue capture by perilous analogy, it has to be helpful to understanding the nature of Sino-American relations today to recognize that historical perspective on this emerging, but unavoidable, rivalry is easily accessible.<sup>6</sup>

For another historical example in illustration of my argument, the several wars waged for influence in, or control over, Afghanistan, by Britain in the 1840s, the 1870s, the 1920s, and 1930s, then by the Soviet Union in the 1980s, followed by the United States (and some North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] allies) in the 2000s, were waged in very different political and strategic contexts. And yet, differences granted, the continuities connecting all of the wars and their warfare in Afghanistan require recognition as providing an essential unity that is understandable through explanation of a single general theory of strategy. I am alert to the possible perils that may follow from the assertion of the essentialist argument that lends itself to misrepresentation as reductionism. It needs to be said that general theory does, indeed has to, reduce the authority of conceptualization developed in aid of understanding particular strategic phenomena. Historical case-specific theory is always likely, though not certain, to be wrong if it appears to threaten the integrity of general theory. However, in the social sciences, theory aspires modestly only to provide most-case understanding for explanation. Exceptions

are permissible, but they are seriously embarrassing only to arrogant and incompetent theorists.<sup>7</sup> It has to be noted, though, that if highly plausible exceptions proliferate, then theory should be reconsidered and, if need be, rewritten.

To summarize the argument exercised in this monograph, contemporary American defense debate shows abundant evidence of confusion, poor definitions of key terms and, as a consequence, undisciplined conceptualization. The result of this poor conceptual governance is the suffering of gratuitous damage to U.S. national security. Whatever the strength in the moral and material components of American fighting power, the conceptual component is weak; indeed, it is far weaker than it could and should be, which is the reason for this report and its argument.

## **WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?**

Poor strategic theory is a self-inflicted wound that typically has expensive and harmful consequences. This monograph examines and tests the hypothesis that the American cultural proclivity to theorize about military affairs, to which Antulio Echevarria refers plausibly in the second epigraph above, is proving costly to national and international security. Because this theorization is significantly cultural in an American context, it rests upon, indeed is legitimized by, the cultural assumption that such an activity inherently is beneficial. The problem with this assumption is not any basic fallacy; far from it. Rather, the difficulty lies in the amount of theory that is built, and also with its character. The familiar claim that quantity has a quality all its own tends to apply pejoratively with regard to American debate. Regardless of the particular

subject of American debate, for example, pertaining to issues of nuclear deterrence in the Cold War, to revolutions in military affairs (RMA) and military and strategic transformation in the 1990s, and to COIN and counterterrorism (CT) in the 2000s, approximately the same dynamics operate. For reasons of professional career advancement, of the inherent debating fuel in contending ideas, the sheer logic and grammar of competition, and the scale of the particular national context for intellectual argument, in recent times (post 1945) American strategic theoretical debate habitually has proceeded too far, too fast, and with inadequate reference to what could and should be gleaned from historical experience. The debate needs gleaning, and such gleaning requires the services of strategic theory fit for the purpose, since the past does not supply its own meaning for us.

It is all too easy to be critical of poor strategic theory, let alone of an absence of theory worthy of the label. But my purpose here is not simply to criticize; rather, it is to be constructive in identifying the kind and character of theory that should perform its proper role and serve its needed function well enough. It is an objective feature of America, one from which much that is cultural derives, that its sheer size brings into play the aphorism cited already that alleges a qualitative consequence to sheer quantity. As Samuel P. Huntington once observed, America is a large country that does things in a large way.<sup>8</sup> Whereas most countries have defense and national security communities of distinctly modest size, if that, the United States is peopled abundantly and beyond by military and strategic theorists, naturally occupying the full spectrum of competence. The American marketplace for strategic, military, and other security ideas is very much

larger than anywhere else on the planet. There are more strategy-related jobs and career paths in America than elsewhere; there is more money available to fund research and writing; and because of America's global strategic status and role, there is more about which to theorize that plainly has relevance for national public policy. The American cultural proclivity to theorize about strategic affairs is, in principle, a source of national advantage. The first of the epigraphs that head this text, by Carl von Clausewitz, tersely explains why. Theory, including strategic theory, sorts out what is in need of being sorted. As observed already, in the social sciences theory provides most-case explanations of phenomena. In order to be able to explain what has happened, or is happening, or why a particular choice of, say, military ways and means, organized and directed by a plan, will cause what we want to happen, we need to understand the subject of strategy. Theory does not make strategy work, but when it is well crafted, it educates practicing strategists so that they are enabled to understand what they are doing, and why.<sup>9</sup> Readers are warned, perhaps gratuitously, that because I am a strategic theorist, my argument might appear biased in praise of my trade. I make explicit mentions of my personal commitment to theory for strategy, because there is a theme in the argument here that is strongly critical of (largely) American strategic theorizing, and I cannot deny some small measure of responsibility for the ill condition with which I must find fault. I have been not merely present as an observer at the scene of conceptual crime; I have been an actively contributing participant also.<sup>10</sup>

Specifically, I will argue that while some strategic theory is good, indeed is essential, a lot of strategic theory is not necessarily better, while a great deal of

strategic theory is apt to be positively harmful. A realistic grasp of the American context for this discussion is literally vital. Most countries do not have a public strategic debate, or even much of an official one so far as one can tell. Of course, it may be claimed that most countries have little if any need of a national strategic debate. Although all polities with military and other security agencies have to engage in defense planning keyed in good part to a fiscal narrative, American activity in this regard is unique in quantity and quality (referring to its character, not to its normative merit). National cultures – public, strategic, military – do alter, but this less than dazzling historical insight should not obscure the force of cultural inertia, which is to say of continuity over change.<sup>11</sup> For the particular purpose of this enquiry, it is important to accept the United States as being what it is, especially because my argument does lend itself to some misrepresentation as a naïve and impractical suggestion for conceptual reform.

Critics of cultural-leaning arguments are able to score points by highlighting the many serious weaknesses in cultural analysis, but in their eagerness to damage unsound social science theory, they can miss much of the plot.<sup>12</sup> Historians severely critical of Britain's strategic performance in World War I sometimes seem barely able to conceal their annoyance at the undeniable fact that the excellent German Army somehow managed to lose the war. For good and substantial reasons, America's strategic and military beliefs, attitudes, and habits are what they are, and they are worthy of the cultural label. American society is inclined to excess. Most U.S. features are larger than their functional equivalents abroad, typically by a wide margin. Of particular relevance to this

discussion is the sheer size of the American national security effort, one that helps define a scale of human and institutional domain that is unique. Although this monograph is about theory for strategy, it is largely empirical, not deductive, in the evidential base for its argument. One does not aspire to spark conceptual revolution or, being realistic, even substantial reforms. But one can hope to encourage some modest improvement in the way that strategy is theorized by those accessible to the possibility of influence. This is a role for the strategic educator; as Clausewitz claimed, at least one should be able to label as harmful some of the weeds of ignorance that inhibit strategic understanding.

The principal cost of an oversupply of poor-to-mediocre strategic theory is that its customers have difficulty identifying and holding onto the strategic plot. As new, or more usually old, ideas are coined or rediscovered, and as they proliferate promiscuously, the core meaning of the subject of strategy can slip away. It is less exciting than are the typically rather elusive ideas expressed in new jargon created by the intellectual pathfinders of contemporary strategic debate. To be professionally expert is to be skilled and current in the use of the buzzwords that today are selling well in the marketplace of ideas. Food of a healthy kind is good for us, but even healthy food consumed in excess ceases to be beneficial. A country with global ambitions and responsibilities needs a lively public debate on strategy, but that debate has a dynamic of its own, far beyond the fuel of real-world anxieties, that sparks it episodically. The demand for strategic theory, which is to say for explanation as an aid to understanding, creates the provision of its supply, but the supply takes off on a path of more than

marginally self-sustained growth, with theory serving the narrow needs of theory rather than those of policy and strategy in practice. It is worth noting that just as theory about war fuels yet more theory about war, so Clausewitz appears to warn that it is the nature of war to serve itself. Politics may be the purpose of war, but it is certainly not its nature.<sup>13</sup>

A cast of thousands of variably talented Americans compete for attention and rewards in the fairly open marketplace where ideas about policy, strategy, security, and every aspect of military affairs are debated. These competitions are going to produce successive waves of concepts and proposals, as the hot topics of the day rise, peak, decline, and then all but vanish from sight until they reappear in somewhat different garb a few years later. Since the 1950s, strategic advice has long been a business in the United States. This industry, with its think tanks, centers, institutes, councils, forums, and the rest, feeds on public anxiety, actual and plausibly anticipated. Both intellectual and career dynamics reward novelty. And happily for the theorists of national security, at least in matters of detail, every development that might warrant identification as a challenge truly is different. However, unlike every student at school in Lake Wobegone, not all of our strategic theorists are above average. Rather more to the point, many of the official and other customers for supposedly expert strategic theory and advice will not be able to tell which of the glittering conceptual products on offer are the genuine articles in strategic wisdom.

To summarize the problem that this monograph addresses: The U.S. extended-defense community is impoverished in its grasp of the country's strategic challenges and of sound ways to meet them by the



poverty in the quality (not quantity) of the conceptual education and advice that should provide understanding for explanation. A major source of the problem is structural to the United States; really, it is existential. The strategic concepts industry is both adequately funded to support research of every quality, and has long matured into near self-sustaining intellectual orbit. The focus of this discussion is on the often contrasted alleged alternatives of irregular and traditional challenges, but the very recent and still somewhat current, if now tiring and soon to be exhausted, strategic debate about COIN and CT needs to be regarded in the historical perspective of other great and not-so-great strategic debates. Leading examples of such debates include those over strategy for nuclear weapons, RMA and transformation, and now the still emerging contention over the strategic meaning of cyberpower.

The master argument of this report, the intellectual center of gravity of all else, holds that the U.S. defense community typically overintellectualizes the challenges (problems/opportunities) that it perceives. With a culture that privileges theory-building through disaggregation by categorical exclusivity, whole subject areas are conceptually deconstructed and reassembled for neater granular treatment. The big picture tends to be off stage, replaced by creative constructions of allegedly particular forms or aspects of that whole conception. Unfortunately, the actual and potential benefits of theoretical exclusivity are more than offset by the transaction cost in the loss of context. For example, when one theorizes about what was thought of as limited war, a conceptual staple of the 1950s and early 1960s, it matters vitally whether one is coining a concept expressed in two words of approximately

equal weight, or rather a concept of war with an adjectival modifier.<sup>14</sup> This issue could be regarded as mere academic pedantry, but its resolution had immense practical implications for strategy.<sup>15</sup>

When scholars are unleashed without political constraint to try to understand a subject with which they are unfamiliar, they will proceed whither their imagination takes them. When real-world experience is absent, logic unharried by empirical evidence will have to suffice to explain the structure of a subject. When logic rules, the creative energy of highly intelligent people will produce impressive intellectual artifacts that are both monuments to reason, and offensive to the reason inherent in common sense. Herman Kahn's escalation ladder with its 44 steps offered an impressive tool to assist understanding of the structural dynamics of conflict.<sup>16</sup> Kahn was not confused about the imagined, which is to say constructed, character of his theoretical ladder, but one cannot say as much with confidence for many of his readers and briefees. In the praiseworthy quest for deeper understanding, scholars can hardly help but succumb to the temptation to reach out for more, only to find that the result of their efforts inadvertently is some notable loss of comprehension of the phenomenon that needs to be approached as a whole. Metaphorically expressed, there is a fog of theory.

This monograph proceeds by focusing attention on the still popular grand distinction between irregular and traditional challenges to national security, and on whether this familiar binary opposition is sensible. The discussion then seeks to identify the ways in which strategic theory can help understanding as an enabling educator for sound practice. The monograph concludes by offering specific recommendations in aid of U.S. national security policy and strategy.

## CHALLENGES: NOT A SIMPLE SPECTRUM

Given the fecundity of conceptual error, the would-be policeman for useful theory has difficulty knowing which ideas to arrest and incarcerate first. Empirical investigation of the historical experiential base for the proposition that the United States faces two categories of challenge, irregular and traditional, easily reveals the fallacy in this popular claim. However, the process of investigation into the merit in the master binary thesis uncovers, as it were serendipitously, a fallacy even more fundamental and therefore more deadly than the erroneous idea that challenges come fairly neatly in only two major variants or baskets of subvariants. To hazard a notably reductionist simplification in the interest of clarity, recent American strategic debate, inclusive of the argument in this report (see Option 3 below), offers in the main three conceptual choices covering the subjects of challenges, war, warfare, strategy, and tactics. These are itemized and explained in such a way as to facilitate debate, not as claimed paraphrases of the theses of particular strategic theorists.

### Option 1.

The U.S. national security and defense planning universe is quite tidily binary. Challenges (or threats) come in just two admittedly uncomfortably inclusive varieties, *irregular* or *traditional* (or *regular*). These two huge conceptual tents purportedly cover, if not quite shelter, the entire range of menacing actualities and possibilities. Irregular challenges are understood broadly to emanate from nonstate political actors,

while traditional ones are those posed by states. The character of threat is dictated very largely by the nature and characteristic capabilities of its perpetrator. The signature military style of irregular belligerents is guerrilla tactics privileging a hit-and-run, which is to say raiding, style in warfare.

## **Option 2.**

The challenge or threat environment for the United States does not divide neatly into menaces readily and unambiguously classified as either irregular or traditional. Instead, following the trinitarian lead set by Julius Caesar, with his famous claim that *Gallia est omnia divisa in partes tres* (Gaul is entirely divided into three parts), as have so many strategic thinkers down the centuries, we may choose to recognize that today's challenges need to be classified as *irregular*, or *hybrid*, or *traditional* (regular, conventional).<sup>17</sup> This trinity of postulated types is believed by its proponents to provide the additional, third, large conceptual tent that is necessary in order to cover and capture the full spectrum of perils.

## **Option 3.**

It is not self-evident that the invention, the conceptual construction—or should one say, the discovery—of a third category of challenge (*hybrid*) is a significant advance over the binary distinction it may replace. In the process of analyzing the relative merit in the hybrid postulate one realizes, unsurprisingly, that the record—even the recent and contemporary record—of strategic historical experience can support plausible claims for more categories than three. It dawns on the scholar as a less-than-startling epiphany that the

hybrid thesis is not wrong, but rather is so fundamentally correct that it defies robust concept containment in its own allegedly distinctive tent.<sup>18</sup> In common with asymmetry, hybridity does indeed characterize challenges. But the problem for the construction of useful strategic theory is that some hybridity and asymmetry are not exactly a rare exception in strategic history; rather, they are such typical features in strategic rivalry that there appears to be a fatal flaw in the proposition that there are distinctively hybrid challenges, wars, strategies, and styles of warfare. Hybridity is not hard to find; in fact, it is too easy. Ironically, the recognition that hybridity is a conceptual vessel that holds too much water to be analytically useful, triggers the epiphany identified here as Option 3: the seemingly unimaginative proposition that the popular, and indeed official, system(s) of challenge categorization is probably fundamentally unsound. There are not two, or three, or 23 categories of challenges, wars, strategies, and kinds of warfare. Instead, there is only one category of challenge—meaning that categorization, no matter how well intended, is more likely to confuse than it is to enlighten. Far from producing a conceptually undisciplined homogenization of possible menace, an insistence that challenges, wars, strategies, and warfare should be corralled inclusively at a high level of generality as notably like, even common, phenomena, provides the intellectual discipline and guidance that enables forensic historical case-specific understanding and strategic practice. To illustrate: COIN is more prudently and certainly effectively prosecuted in its needful aspects as violent sociology and armed anthropology, if those worthy population-centric endeavors are pursued by a grand strategy that is not confused about the facts that the political and strategic

context is one of war with some more, or less, active warfare.<sup>19</sup> Excessive categorical creativity has the effect of encouraging thinking about COIN that spins away from the military context, while some claim that leading brands of COIN theory and practice are systematically unfriendly to strategy.<sup>20</sup> This is a plausible charge, though it tends to be overstated as stridency tends to grow with repetition of argument, and assertion rises in reaction to criticism (I do not exempt myself from this charge).

The austere typology above can be summarized as a conceptual choice among postulated schemas for challenges that offer two categories (Option 1: irregular and traditional), three categories (Option 2: irregular, hybrid, and traditional) and one category, which means no category (Option 3: threat categorization is rejected). This refusal to categorize strategic challenges rests upon the conviction that the making of distinctions between allegedly radically different species of menace has the intellectually fatal unintended consequence of gratuitously weakening conceptual grasp and grip. For a defense community that has a history of poor understanding of strategy, a poverty repeatedly lamented by would-be reformers—not withstanding the community’s proclivity to theorize—any conceptualization that positively encourages unsound strategic ideas should be stamped on without mercy.<sup>21</sup> Of course, we lack historical perspective on the 2000s, but from today’s vantage point it seems unlikely to this author that America’s strategic performances in Iraq, Afghanistan, and overall in the “long war” against the abstract noun “terror” warrant a passing grade for competence in concept and practice.

Because many personal defense professional careers, records, and egos may seem to be placed at some risk by the argument in this text, it is unusually important that I should not be misunderstood. It can be a hard sell to try to persuade professional strategic theorists that less theory is likely to help explain more strategic phenomena than is more theory. It is essential to theorize, as Clausewitz argued persuasively for all time, but sharply diminishing returns to extra effort are soon recorded in the conceptual space occupied and colonized by strategic theory.<sup>22</sup> Even if it is appropriate to claim, with Brian Linn, that military intellectuals have failed to secure a convincing and useful conceptual grip on contemporary war, it does not have to follow that more theory is the answer.<sup>23</sup> A lack of historical perspective and career dynamics tend to lead defense professionals both to rediscover what long has been known, albeit often forgotten, and to be attracted to claimed conceptual novelty. The problem for U.S. national security that is dominantly thematic for this discussion is not strategic theory per se. Absent strategic theory, one would lose the ability to comprehend strategic history. Theory and its conceptual tools are vital to the search for solutions to the challenges perceived as posed to national security; at least, they can be. This analysis seeks to contribute to better theory. Because ideas can be a potent source of influence over strategic behavior, it is important, even if they are less than obviously brilliant, that they should do little if any harm. The medical analogy here is a compelling one. A serious difficulty for well-meaning strategic theorists frequently lurks often under-recognized in their sparkling prose and astonishing graphics. Specifically, strategy is not about elegance of language, ingenuity of method, or creativity of concept. Rather, strategy is an eminently practical

project. In much the same way that a technically superior weapon can be unfit for its purpose in the field if it requires skills to maintain and use that exceed those owned by its average military user, so strategic and military theory can be lethally unfit for its practical purpose. An ancient military maxim springs to mind: Nothing is impossible to the man who does not have to try to do it.

A four-fold argument serves to capture the core of what needs to be said about meeting challenges to national security, with particular reference to the contribution that should be made by strategic theory.

1. Challenge identification and measurement is not always obvious. Where you stand, when you stand up, and what you do next, depends critically on where you believe you sit—to misquote and expand upon the long-standing central proposition of the theory of bureaucratic politics.<sup>24</sup> This enquiry does not have a vacuum at its heart, but certainly it is potentially blighted by the concept that fuels it—the idea of “challenges” to national security. The question of “when is a challenge not a challenge, but something else, and if so, what?”—begs enticingly for scholarly attention. Fortunately, there is no strict obligation placed upon this analysis to identify challenges, current or arguably anticipatable in the future. It suffices for this text to assist with education in strategic thought. Nonetheless, I would be severely remiss in my duty here were I simply to assume that the challenges central to my mission comprised phenomena of a species that is reliably detectable by a faultless challenge-detection monitoring machine.

Even when an act occurs that is unmistakably challenging—September 11, 2001 (9/11), for example—it may not be entirely self-evident quite what the challenge means. The United States has been challenged,



but over what and to do what? And if the answers to those questions have to be provided substantially by us, the targeted victims, then the strategic context of decision is substantially different from one wherein the challenge essentially is existential. It is worth noting that even existentially explicit challenges, such as those issued to the United States by Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany in December 1941, still may well leave Washington with a great deal of room for discretion over strategy, if not much over policy guidance in those extreme cases.

The popular concept of challenges to national security can be sliced and diced forensically as preferred. But, as indicated above, the more exclusive of the larger claimed species (or subspecies) irregular, hybrid, and traditional or regular—are not very helpful. Leaving aside the categorization issue for the moment, consider the ever-potential fragility of the choice of word for the central concept. Challenges to national security compete with the following possible alternatives: threats, dangers, risks, perils, menaces, anxieties, and concerns for some candidate substitutes on the negative side. Considered positively, national security challenges may well lend themselves persuasively to identification as opportunities. And, to muddy the water noticeably, many challenges appear to be fraught with peril while also containing the promise of possible significant reward. Risk and cost-free challenges-as-opportunities are few and far between in strategic history. The word or words chosen to define a happening, actual or anticipated, can shape perception. Also, languages differ markedly in the range of conceptual menace and the subtlety that their vocabularies offer to their users. By way of sharp contrast with Pearl Harbor and 9/11, there is Nazi Germany's

reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936, or the lesson in great-power prerogatives (and the prudence in very small power acquiescence)—when Russia in 2006 instructed Georgia in the matter of geopolitical realities. In these latter cases, the character of the event is not quite so easy to identify; hence, the character of most suitable response is debatable.

If one likes spectrums for the classification of strategic happenings, how should the concept of challenge be assayed? The possibilities are many. The more obvious spectrums are those attempts to classify by: type (e.g., irregular, hybrid, traditional); seriousness of potential consequences, scale of potential danger, degree of risk; likelihood of occurrence; time frame (e.g., current, imminent, medium-term, distant); and comprehension (e.g., believed to be understood in detail, understood generically—known unknown, suspected, truly unknown unknowns but feared for their mystery).<sup>25</sup> There is always plenty to worry about, but the vital issues of how great a worry—when, exactly what, and then what to do about it—rarely lend themselves to clear and compelling answers.

2. The rank-ordering of challenges (and their respective risks) to national security is an art, not a science (not even a social science), and typically is contestable. One would have to be extraordinarily naïve to believe that challenges to national security, however, or indeed even if, categorized by character (irregular and so forth), may convincingly be rank-ordered on a single scale. Only on the political campaign trail or in the mass media, with their frequent disdain for context and historical perspective, should one expect to find challenges, usually portrayed as threats rather than opportunities, conveniently weighed and

arranged in descending order of seriousness. From the late 1950s to the present day, there has never been any question about the challenge, if understood either as explicit and overt or latent but existential, that poses the greatest threat to the security of Americans. That threat, of course, resided and resides in the nuclear-armed strike capabilities of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)/Russia and (after 1964) the People's Republic of China (PRC). As ideas tend to dominate over mere military muscle, so politics is hegemonic over strategic history.<sup>26</sup> But national security challenges, to be plausible candidates for American identification as such, usually require some inferably hostile intentions as well as the physical means to do harm. When enemy identification falters and then either dies or at least is in semi-retirement, as was the case in U.S. – Russian political and strategic relations in the 1990s and 2000s, the latent but still objective menace in nuclear strike forces is greatly reduced by the absence of a subjective, convincingly perceived, threat. The contemporary PRC is more easily anticipated as America's superpower enemy from hell in the 21st century than careful strategic net assessment suggests probable. The PRC's relative weakness in each geographical domain of the global commons – air, orbital space, and possibly even cyberspace – in the context of global security geopolitics and geostrategy, suggests strongly that China, though predictably formidable, is unlikely to resemble the USSR as a full-service challenge.<sup>27</sup>

Ironically, it is a matter beyond historical dispute that the most frequent, persistent, and therefore, in an obvious sense, regular and traditional, of America's national security challenges have been irregular – at least as characterized in common linguistic usage. The

waging of warfare against non-state foes has rarely been a popular activity, but repeatedly it has been the military action of the day.<sup>28</sup> Public enthusiasm for COIN and CT has not been the typical domestic political context for U.S. strategic behavior, but time after time the country has risen to what its leaders chose to define as a military-strategic challenge. Repeatedly, Washington has had difficulty coping in domestic politics with the apparently objective facts that the extant challenges, if they should be identified as such, were not those most dangerous to national security. September 11, 2001, was tactically extraordinary, but in common with nearly all acts of terror, it had a complete inability to effect strategic change, unless the American response elected to fuel a course of events that might do so. The knock-on effects of mass-destruction terrorism can only be lethal to the economic and political stability of the targeted populace if those victims panic and in imprudent response bring down their own political house. The immense damage suffered by the U.S. economy over the past decade was not the direct result of brilliance in the grand strategy of al Qaeda. Rather, it was the product of poor American (*inter alia*) financial governance, and a lack of competent political leadership. The damage that al Qaeda and its affiliates could do to America and the international order for which America was, and remains, the hegemon, was minor compared with America's capacity for self-harm. This is less than a deep insight, because in most conflicts the victors require notable inadvertent assistance from their enemies. What I have just described is not intended as an indictment; it is a reminder of the normal context of strategic history. Competent strategic theory and prudent practical strategies do not ignore the flawed nature of human actors and the in-

stitutions and processes they employ; they accept the enduring realities of ubiquitous human imperfection, as well as the permanency of contingency and friction.

Errors in policy and strategy over challenges that appear in what typically are categorized as irregular form are apt to be tragic only on a minor scale, when considered coldly at the society-wide level. In contrast, policy mistakes and strategic imprudence with respect to threat events usually categorized as traditional, most especially those that appear with a nuclear signature, would almost certainly have consequences fatal to America's future—existentially in both physical and political senses. It will not have escaped readers' notice that nuclear warfare conducted on any scale and guided in accordance with any strategy would be a highly unusual, indeed an extraordinary, military activity. However, whether or not war with nuclear weapons should be categorized as irregular is a matter of conceptual and political discretion. The employment of a few nuclear weapons for the primary purpose of inducing fear—the most classic defining characteristic of terrorism—certainly renders such use a candidate for irregular status. Moreover, simply the extreme rarity of nuclear use could support a common sense case for its categorical irregularity. But common usage, arguably as opposed to common sense, typically assigns nuclear warfare to the highest high-end position on the favored conflict spectrum. Nuclear war would be “big war,” as contrasted with some understanding of “small war” (e.g., that classified by Charles E. Callwell and later by the U.S. Marine Corps), even though it cannot be entirely reasonable, let alone logical, to term a postulated activity regular, when it has not occurred for 66 years.<sup>29</sup>

For a while in the early 1950s, leading American strategic theorists, and certainly the U.S. armed services, believed that atomic weapons should be regarded as regular and possibly as having both honorary and practical status akin to their being traditional and conventional.<sup>30</sup> If nearly all cases of future warfare are expected to have an active, not only a deterrent, atomic dimension, then it is logical to regard atomic weapons as conventional. It is worth noting that in the 1950s, the atomic and irregular ends of the conflict spectrum were somewhat combined in a shotgun strategic marriage. The atomic battlefield was expected to oblige armies to wage land combat in a guerrilla style, in order to deny lucrative concentrated targets to the enemy's atomic weapons. The second nuclear revolution, that which enabled the weaponization of atomic fusion rather than atomic fission alone, changed the terms of strategic argument. Thermonuclear weapons arrived in the mid-1950s, just when Soviet technological prowess was beginning to render nuclear deterrence inconveniently mutual. It is not unreasonable to claim that the U.S. Army's temporary infatuation with an agile, guerrilla-raiding style of atomic land warfare, warrants retrospective designation as a hybrid concept. Guerrilla style warfare with nuclear weapons is surely such a concept, if anything is.

There may well be some classification schemas for war and for types of warfare that identify categories of phenomena sufficiently robust in their distinctiveness as to have high utility for policy and strategy. But, I must report that the more closely I look at popular and official categories of conflicts, wars, strategies, and tactics, the less convincing, indeed the more misleading, they seem to be. The launch pad for this analysis, as noted already, was the realization that

our now long-standing strategic theoretical efforts to categorize and subcategorize conflicts, wars, types of warfare, strategies, and even tactics, were seriously flawed systemically. But the urge to categorize and clarify, after the fashion of Victorian entomologists identifying new species of insects, is irresistible and in some respects praiseworthy in its quest for greater useful understanding. It follows that the only practicable mission now is one of damage limitation, and this is where the general theory of strategy must play a vital educational role.

Accepting some risk of overstatement, it is necessary at least to consider the proposition that many of the larger conceptual categories in our intellectual arsenal are perilously porous and substantially misleading. Prominent examples include: limited war, irregular war, regular war, hybrid war, and conventional deterrence. Each of these offerings by way of illustration has a more-than-marginal capacity to encourage fallacious thinking. However, the difficulty lies not so much, if at all, with the concepts themselves in their core meaning. Rather, the problem lies in the misunderstanding of these concepts, as they became decontextualized through familiarity. By way of terse explanation:

- *Limited war* describes all war in its character as politically motivated behavior. But it is also in the nature of warfare to provide its own (military) meaning; in other words, literally to be self-serving. The claim that there are limited wars implies logically that there could be unlimited ones. This is misleading on several counts, but primarily because such a description encourages the fallacy that some wars inherently are political, whereas in reality all wars serve

both politics and their own dynamics, and the two are apt to prove antagonistic. Also, because war is a duel (at least), it will have a character reflecting the interactive outcome of two or more belligerents, with the whole combined endeavor, or chaotic imbroglio, fueled by the dynamic nature of warfare itself.<sup>31</sup>

- *Irregular, regular, and hybrid war* are more problematic than not; in too many historical cases they are not reliably useful for understanding. These concepts are not empirically wrong—quite the reverse. Depending upon the definitions preferred, some unmistakable evidence of irregularity, regularity, and hybridity is unlikely to be absent from many, if not most, wars. From the perspective of a defense planner today, it is seriously unhelpful, and most probably, is potentially misleading in a fatal way, to hypothesize that in the 21st century America needs to be ready to fight irregular, regular, and hybrid wars. It is a modest intellectual improvement to argue that America should be able to wage warfare irregularly, regularly, or in a hybrid manner. Nonetheless, this postulate encourages the unsound conviction that future wars and their dominant characteristics can be regarded as fixed and given by others. For a global superpower, this is not a strategically healthy belief, nor is it plausible.
- *Conventional deterrence*, in common with conventional war in a nuclear context, is a dangerous idea that is always in peril of empirical falsification. Of course, the idea is strategically meaningful: The problem is that it is an idea that must rest upon potentially highly unre-



liable assumptions. No matter how conventional a war is expected to be or remain in its now long traditional meaning of non-nuclear, if it is waged by one or more belligerents who are nuclear-armed, or between belligerents with nuclear-armed close friends abroad, there is always going to be a nuclear dimension to hostilities, actual or potential. When there is a nuclear context, albeit a currently inactive one, the integrity of the concept of conventional war has to be at risk. In such circumstances, conventional war is not a strategic truth and should not be a matter of faith alone; rather, it is an aspiration whose existentiality may need to be fought for, carefully. The strategic literature of the late 1950s and the early- to mid-1960s, debated this matter exhaustively. Could NATO and the Warsaw Pact have successfully waged a non-nuclear war in Europe? Happily, we shall never know. But what we do know for certain is that the integrity of the conceptual category of conventional war(s) between nuclear-armed polities has to be problematic in the extreme.<sup>32</sup> Bernard Brodie's period piece, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option* (1966), continues to have merit for the discipline it encourages among our more constructivist and optimistic theorists.<sup>33</sup>

3. The adoption of exclusive categories of challenge does gratuitous damage to prudent defense planning. It is hard to prepare adequately to meet challenges that comprise known unknowns, but it is even harder to prepare to meet the challenges that are unknown unknowns (to borrow from the wit and wisdom at-

tributed to the ever-quotable Donald H. Rumsfeld). For the purposes of the discussion immediately above, it was assumed conveniently that the content of the challenges, threats, opportunities, and risks of the future pose no insuperable difficulties to competent future-leaning strategic analysts and theorists. Rather, the issue was one of categorization of empirically largely unproblematic phenomena. It is necessary for this discussion to break ranks briefly from the expedient assumption that future challenges are sufficiently known or knowable as to allow elevation to conceptual classification over particular future historical developments. It is not my position to argue that the particular course that global strategic history will take in the 21st century is important for the design of our strategic conceptual apparatus; how could it be, since we have no map of that future course? Since this text privileges the value of general strategic theory, and is suspicious, at least, of challenge categorization, it is useful to remind readers of what they know and do not know about the strategic phenomena that constitute the ultimate content for this examination. The categorization issue concerning future challenges has a major bearing upon the fitness for their purposes of America's armed forces. Two principal uncertainties have to be flagged—one of which can be minimized, but not eliminated.

The first uncertainty was targeted conceptually by then-Secretary Rumsfeld; the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns. To his two classes of ignorance, it is advisable to add a possibly more potent third—the knowns that are falsely classified as such. Some of what we believe we know—meaning that we think we understand and can explain—time will reveal we did not in fact know. These three sources of

ignorance constitute a powerful trinity indeed. When they are mobilized to impose restraint on the confidence we place in defense planning, their dangerous implications become all too easy to identify. All methodologies for the improvement of national security and defense planning aspire either to achieve, or to compensate for, the impossibility of knowing that which is not knowable. Everyone knows that the future is blank until it happens, and, of course, it never can happen, because in its nature, the future moves ahead of us as we ourselves move forward in time. And yet, despite some average or better competence in physics, defense professionals persist in referring to the “foreseeable future”—a term that describes a scientific impossibility. Lest there be any inadvertent ambiguity, it needs to be understood that the future is not, has never been, and cannot be, foreseeable. This is not to say that the future of interest to strategists is a mystery; fortunately, it is anything but. However, future events are not reliably predictable, foreseeable, or even anticipatable—as particular events. Ignorance of future historical detail, even major detail, typically is not usefully reducible by better means and methods of intelligence gathering and subsequent analysis. The course of history is too richly populated with players and possible circumstances to be modeled for the purpose of prediction. Even if some readers are willing to place more faith in social scientific theory than am I, the most-case generalizations of that theory are apt to founder on the rocks of the several classes of “unknowns” cited above. But, happily, all is not lost, and the dangers that lurk in the strategic history of the future can be minimized, though certainly not eliminated or confidently evaded. And an important safety measure that the United States can apply to its

many perils is the subject of this enquiry. This measure can be summarized in the two words: conceptual prudence.

The second uncertainty about challenges (threats, dangers, risks, opportunities, and so forth) beyond, but derivative directly from, the first uncertainty discussed already—lack of knowledge—is how to categorize or classify them. How should we think about, understand, approach, and therefore logically be prepared to meet the challenges of this new century? Should we be unifying, combining, and assembling aggregations of challenges? Or, should we proceed forensically to distinguish, dissect, and identify the many kinds of menace and opportunity that future strategic history may well throw our way (including those troubling unknown unknowns that we would worry about if only we knew what they were)? To cut to the chase: Is it possible or desirable to categorize future anticipated challenges to the United States as either irregular or traditional? Is it a notable improvement to expand challenge categorization to a triad including hybrid phenomena? And is it feasible or sensible to conduct defense planning in tailored preparation for the conceptually, and possibly eventually empirically, distinctive categories? One has to ask the classic strategist's question, even if particular happenings appear to pose challenges of an irregular, traditional, or hybrid kind—"So what?" It is fundamentally unsound to assume that in order to meet challenges effectively, American action would need to be of a similar kind. Asymmetric war can work for all belligerents in its adversarial nature as conflict. It cannot be sensible to adopt such exclusive categories of challenge as irregular, traditional, and hybrid, because these intellectual boxes tend to achieve a conceptual creep with unfortunate imperial consequences.

The two or three categories simultaneously are too exclusive to capture the complexity and richness of strategic historical experience, yet more than sufficient to mislead the unwary into falling victim to several powerful fallacies. For example, a challenge posed by irregular means and methods (though most probably for regular goals),<sup>34</sup> need not translate as an irregular war. We have a vote on how and by what means the conflict is conducted.<sup>35</sup> All sides are not required to employ only the same means and methods. War and warfare in the 21st century do not follow a chivalrous dueling code. Without neglecting considerations of law and the applied morality in strategic ethics, it is imprudent to think that there are characteristically irregular, traditional, or hybrid challenges. Such categorization must privilege strategic and military specialization at the expense of adaptability for fungibility.<sup>36</sup>

The categorization of challenge criticized here layers a needless burden of understanding on an American national security community that already has difficulties enough deriving from the unforeseeability of future strategic history. Not only are our defense planners required to try to know that which is unknowable because there can be no specific evidence for it; in addition, the categorization at issue would require them to classify that which they do not know into conceptually and imprudently exclusive baskets of cases. Looking to possible practical implications, it is likely that a defense community willing to sign on for two or three conceptual categories of challenge would be a community likely to pick one such category as its “best buy” for now, peering into an allegedly foreseeable future. Defense preparation would lean toward readiness to prosecute conflicts in the “winning” category of challenge, inevitably at the cost of lesser readi-

ness for those challenges that are not anticipated to be probable events.

The ill consequences of categorization are as predictable as they would be unanticipated by a defense community unduly confident that it was riding the wave of a sufficiently foreseen strategic future. There is a way in which the United States can prepare prudently for a strategic future that it cannot foresee in detail, but that way does not require, indeed should not entail, exclusive selection from the conceptual catalog of challenges. The United States requires a holistic vision of its strategic context in all senses, and should seek the adaptability it will need to meet unique challenges from its truly common basket of grand strategic, including military, strengths. However, the argument for coherence and unity in U.S. national security and defense policy has to be prefaced by an appreciation of the nature of American competitive (grand) strategic performance.

4. The United States has a vote in strategic competition. Although challenges (or threats) will be guided by strategy enabled by tactics, they should not be defined by the forms that they take in military action. When considering the concepts as irregular and traditional (and hybrid) challenges, it is easy to forget that both the noun and the adjective are seriously problematic. To clarify: Whether or not a challenge truly is such is by no means an obviously objective matter; subjectively, the United States usually has some discretion over challenge identification. Turning from the noun to the adjectives, irregular and traditional (and hybrid) characterize tactical choices by the adversary. The United States is under obligation neither to define foreign menace or action as a challenge, nor,

should it elect to respond, to do so in a like tactical style. The proposition that the future holds both irregular and traditional challenges encourages the fallacy that one needs two kinds of armed forces—really two armies—optimized for military effectiveness against each species of challenge. This is nonsense, but unfortunately, it is seductively persuasive. The conceptual error from which can flow a deadly stream of strategic and tactical mistakes is the fundamental categorical misidentification of the problem. Given that every challenge, threat, or opportunity will be unique in many important details, still each and every one of them must in the first instance be considered as a policy issue for statecraft, which means for grand strategy. Should politics determine a policy that may require prosecution by armed force, then that grand strategy must encompass a military dimension to the whole project. The point in need of emphasis is that irregular, traditional, or hybrid challenges have to be approached as political challenges, then as grand strategic challenges, before one joins the imminent adversary in the conduct of military operations in a tacitly agreed-upon common style. COIN and CT, as obvious examples, can be met in more than modestly mirror-imaging ways tactically. Given the typical asymmetry in assets between insurgents and counterinsurgents, it cannot be prudent to construct a conceptual redoubt that must discourage consideration of bold tactical options that are unavailable to the enemy.

There is everything to be said in praise of Sun Tzu's insistence upon the value of understanding the enemy.<sup>37</sup> He also insisted that it is no less important to know oneself. The categorization that I am criticizing encourages tactical thinking and practice that is focused upon the enemy's way of fighting, rather than upon strategic effectiveness in the conflict as a

whole. To quote the Ancient Chinese sage yet again, Sun Tzu advised that the enemy's strategy should be the preferred target of our effort, not his forces per se.<sup>38</sup> The insurgents and terrorists-in-arms are merely the means to enable the enemy's strategy to secure the political effectiveness required for his victory. His tactical defeat is vitally important to us, but at best it is a maximally expensive and lengthy strategic path to victory, while at worst it may not be achievable at tolerable cost.

This monograph should not be misinterpreted as recommending, *a fortiori*, that the United States necessarily should conduct conflicts in ways that are asymmetric to those of our adversaries, only that we should be prepared to do so. In point of fact, we ought not to approach a (grand) strategic problem challenge, threat, or opportunity within a binary or triadic conceptual framework that assumes the case in point is primarily irregular, traditional, or hybrid. The categorical confusion that is produced by the irregular and traditional conceptual baskets encourages poor tactics. Air power, especially kinetic air power, frequently is discounted as allegedly being of only modest value in a COIN campaign, while heavy armor is deemed inappropriate for deployment in urban areas—to cite just two instances of categorically influenced prejudices that have been demonstrated by recent events to be unsound.<sup>39</sup>

My argument is not that a common style of combat, employing most kinds of military assets, can fit all strategic challenges. Rather, I am arguing that we should not adopt conceptual categories of wars, strategies, and challenges that encourage formulaic doctrinal responses keyed to the tactical character of the enemy's chosen behavior. Far from suggesting that



the United States should be inclined to employ disproportionate force, for example, in response to a terrorist outrage or two, I would argue that there can be challenges expressed in terroristic violence to which the American reply should be almost wholly political. U.S. tactics must be case-specific and selected by a grand strategy in enablement of our particular political goals. Lest I be misread, there are circumstances, such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11, in which the American public demands that the enemy ought not only to be thwarted, but should be punished, preferably disproportionately. Clausewitz was right to include popular passion (“primordial violence, hatred, and enmity”) in his trinitarian theory of war.<sup>40</sup> Statecraft can only be conducted on the basis of public consent, and that consent usually requires that the second item in the Thucydidean trinity of “fear, honor, and interest” be respected.<sup>41</sup> Strategic ethics must have a moral foundation.<sup>42</sup> When a public feels itself seriously wronged, there is apt to be potent normative fuel pushing for state action to restore the nation’s affronted “honor.”

To conceive of the strategic world as one that will pose irregular, traditional, or hybrid, challenges is to overprivilege a categorically conceptual context that is unsound. If one postulates a strategic future in the conceptual context of the categories discussed here, it is all but inevitable that the intellectually constructed context is allowed a dominance over that which is contextualized—in this case, the United States and its responses to challenges. For many years, I have sought to argue for the importance of context, but I fear that I may have been dangerously indiscriminate in my thesis.<sup>43</sup> With reference to America’s national security policy, grand strategy, military strategy, and tactics, the international context(s) of challenge

are not entirely “givens.” The United States cannot make its own preferred context for national security — the world is too complex and contingency-prone for that—but neither is it the passive victim of historical circumstance. It is my contention that to think of the future as a source of challenges, however they may be categorized, is to risk inadvertently biasing one’s analysis against making due recognition of the U.S. ability to influence the context that gave birth to perils and opportunities. As conceptual context, the ideational categories of irregular, traditional, and hybrid challenges act like the gravitational force of black holes, consuming the identity and creative initiative of the challenged polity.

## **PREVENTING AND AVOIDING CATEGORICAL CONFUSION: HOW CAN STRATEGIC THEORY HELP?**

### **The “Winton Criteria.”**

Dependence on theory is not discretionary. All plans are theories because they purport to explain how cause is intended to produce desired effect. In the realm of national security, strategic plans, so-called, may in fact fail the acid test to qualify as being worthy of the adjective, should they not rest persuasively on explanations of why particular military means—employed in chosen ways—should result in the strategic effect or political effect that alone can justify the effort proposed or ordered. In other words, strategy is not simply a matter of having ends, ways, and means; rather, the existential test for strategy is a conscious effort to connect the three elements in the strategic trinity. The strategic function, considered simply as

a method, applies to all human activity (and even the human qualifier really is unduly exclusive). The mantra of ends, ways, and means, is fundamental, but it might be improved by the addition of a fourth element, assumptions, were that conceptual category not so difficult to corral and capture in practice. There is a major – one is tempted to say, transcendental – difficulty in the practice of military strategy that cannot be avoided, regardless of the problems that it brings to the strategist's table. Specifically, because the "ends" in the ends, ways, and means triad ultimately have to be political, the elementary logic of the strategy triad is in reality anything but elementary. The difficulty in question is almost so obvious and yet very often seemingly so far from military behavior, that it is neglected. Also, it must be noted that inadvertently and innocently Clausewitz contributes to the problem. To recap, the problem is the distinctive natures of war and politics. A too-rapid acquaintance with the Prussian's great book, possibly in more or less severely bowdlerized form, can mislead people into believing that *On War* compounds war and politics. This is a terrible mistake. Indeed, misunderstanding of the connections between war and politics is a notable contributor to what Michael I. Handel somewhat mistook as the "tacticization of strategy." In point of fact, when (tactical) military activity itself is confused with its political purpose, strategy (though not strategic effect) is absent, not "tacticized."<sup>44</sup>

It should never be forgotten that Clausewitz distinguished with the utmost clarity between military power and its political purpose. This is not a pedantic academic matter. From Hannibal in the Second Punic War, through Napoleon's adventurous military career, and more recently in repeated German, Israeli,

and American malpractice, the high importance of the distinction between warfare and its purpose has been amply evidenced. Antulio J. Echevarria has summarized the issue neatly by contrasting the concepts of a “way of war” with a “way of battle.”<sup>45</sup> It is easy to see why so many people are confused. After all, Clausewitz certainly and emphatically connects war with politics. War is violence, but it is violence as legitimate force applied by and for politics (or policy). However, to say that war is about politics is not to claim that it is politics. Even if one dares, probably overboldly, to argue that war is armed or violent politics, still one is not quite asserting a fusion of the two. When considering Clausewitz’s wondrous trinity, one needs to be careful not to permit the third element, reason, too imperial a significance. While war assuredly is about policy, it is also about the passion of the people and the skill and luck of the military instrument and its commanders. Not infrequently, policy reason has less responsibility for decisions to fight or fight on, than do domestic public emotions of anger and sometimes pity.

When composed carefully, strategic theory can help the practitioner understand his role and provide tests for the structural adequacy of his strategy. Of course, only experience in the field truly will reveal whether the pertinent assumptions, political ends, and (grand) strategy ways and means were sufficiently mutually enabling. A fine explanation of the nature and functions of (strategic) theory has been provided by former Green Beret officer Harold R. Winton.<sup>46</sup> The tasks that he specifies for theory are exceptionally useful as a contribution to conceptual good order. Winton argues that theory should: define the subject; categorize, which means “break the field of study into its constituent parts”; explain, “which is the soul of

theory”; connect “the field of study to other related fields in the universe”; and, finally, anticipate, not predict, the future. It is instructive to apply Winton’s five criteria for theory to the issues discussed in this study. I suggest that his criteria, though not a volley of silver bullets, when viewed and employed as a whole provide a heuristically invaluable conceptual tool as an aid to help avoid categorical and other confusion. Theory should define its subject, but this is not quite as straightforward a task as one might suppose. For example, in a thoughtful and strongly argued study, Frank G. Hoffman prefaced his Introduction with the following bold and far-reaching claim:

The state on state conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are being replaced by Hybrid Wars and asymmetric contests in which there is no clear-cut distinction between soldiers and civilians and between organized violence, terror, crime and war.<sup>47</sup>

Hoffman is certainly partially correct. But, as he also recognizes, hybridity is not exactly a novel characteristic of conflict. The trouble with the hybrid war concept is that it encourages the innovative theorist to venture without limit into the swamp of inclusivity, indeed of a form of encyclopedism. We learn that:

Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.<sup>48</sup>

All of this is empirically true, albeit conceptually categorized by constructive invention. When possibly suffering from intellectual indigestion, one pauses

to ask the rather important bottom-line question, “What are we talking about?” the answer appears to be potentially everything other than pure criminal or military behavior, to the degree to which even these superficially distinctive activities are unambiguously distinguishable. Hoffman and others persuaded of the virtues in the hybrid designation for some wars are not so much wrong as misguided. The concept is both too inclusive to be analytically useful, yet also too suggestive of some exclusivity—to warrant the hybrid badge—to accommodate the rich complexity of historical reality. In his major study of the subject of hybrid wars, Hoffman rightly points to the flaws and fallacies in some of the leading recent alternative efforts at conflict categorization (e.g., compound wars, fourth-generation wars, new wars, unrestricted war, and I must add my current favorite, difficult wars).<sup>49</sup>

After some years of struggle to see merit in the trickle of creative newly constructed categories of conflicts and wars, belatedly I realized that each of the new conceptualizations had some value. None of them were entirely wrong. In fact, each did have some unique worth as an aid to understanding. But the well-intentioned quest after a better grasp on the ever-changing characteristics of conflict misled our strategic theoretical entomologists. What they claim to have done is to discover new species of strategic or strategically relevant behavior, when what they *have* done is to erect conceptual constructions that, in their empirically better evidenced aspects, really are only subspecies, or variants of the one species that is war. If war is defined as the use of organized violence for political purposes, one does not eliminate all grounds for argument (e.g., how much organization?—what is, and what is not, a political purpose?), but there is

a useful balance between inclusivity and an exclusivity keyed to a conceptually plain enough core meaning—the connection between politics and purposeful violence.

Quite rapidly, the effort to make strategic theory more helpful as an explanatory tool exceeds its useful reach; more, rapidly becomes less. The problem lies in unhelpful—one need not say false—conceptualization. By far the most important function of strategic theory is to help the strategic practitioner understand his subject. The theory yields explanation based on understanding at a general level. Significantly, the theory accommodates an almost-infinite granular diversity of detail from historical episode to episode, but each episode is only one in a population of variants of a single species. Metaphorically expressed, war is but one elephant, though it may appear in mixed hybrid, compound, irregular, traditional, *inter alia* forms—depending upon one's view of it. There is everything to be said in praise of efforts to comprehend each violent episode on its own terms—let the local cultural terrain mapping proceed<sup>50</sup>—always provided one does not forget that the particular conflict at issue fits, however uncomfortably, under the very big single tent that is war and strategy conducted by statecraft for politics. No matter whether a conflict is more irregular or more traditional in the means and methods employed, if it fits the Clausewitzian (or any near-Clausewitzian) definition of war, then it is a war. Furthermore, the general theory of strategy has authority over all conflicts, whatever their typological specificity, including their cultural topography.

These fairly elementary points, elemental perhaps, are critically important because they mean that there is a discipline upon military and other violent behavior

that, metaphorically speaking, is in their very DNA as their nature is understood, defined, and explained by their general theories. To illustrate, while, of course, one must adapt one's strategic effort to meet effectively the distinctive challenge of the day, irregular wars, hybrid wars, and others are still wars, and they have to be waged strategically. Fortunately, there is extant a reasonably mature and persuasive general theory of strategy for our education. It should so educate as to enable us to invent or rediscover particular strategies to defeat particular enemies.

It is relevant to mention that the theory of war is not in as healthy a condition as is the theory of strategy. Despite some guilt by association, theoretical writings on strategy have not attracted the quantity and ferocity of normative ire that, understandably but unfortunately, has hindered the understanding and explanation of war. Scholars occupy bookshelves with learned tomes on all aspects of the subject, but on the historical evidence it would appear to be undeniable that war is a near-universal constant actuality or possibility, episodically punctuating the human narrative.<sup>51</sup> However, the undoubted constancy in the threat or reality of organized violence assuredly is teamed with a high variability in means and methods. One can go further and claim plausibly that not only have the material means and conceptualized ways of war evolved radically, but so also the politically determined policy ends sought in conflict have changed over millennia. Nonetheless, as was suggested earlier, the Thucydidean trinity of "fear, honor, and interest" locates the eternal causes of war well enough, despite, or perhaps because of, the parsimony in its extreme reductionism.

Securely founded on a general theory of strategy that constantly is subject to refinement, though on the



evidence thus far, not substantial alteration for improvement, American strategists today can develop the functional, regional, and local strategies that high policy requires. Each and every one of these partial strategies must be developed in the conceptual context provided, and existentially in reality enforced, by the whole single and unified concepts of statecraft, war, strategy, and warfare. This conceptualization helps protect our bolder theorists from themselves, lest they strain too hard to explain what is distinctive about hybrid war, warfare in space, war with nuclear weapons, and the rest. By analogy, our military specialists have their particular specialisms, but they are all of them American soldiers.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This has been a conceptual analysis, which means that it has confined its attention to the intellectual ordering of the strategic universe in aid of the understanding necessary for a convincing explanation. Nearly all of the claims in this text are for logic, plausibility, and utility, not for empirical correctness. For example, there are no scientific laboratory tests for hybrid war, any more than there are for the imminence or actuality of RMA. How hybrid does a war need to be for it to merit candidate status for inclusion in the hybrid list, or how radical a change in military affairs should be demanded before developments deserve inclusion on the honor roll of RMAs? We are in the realm of logic, reason (as in “it stands to reason that . . .”), and persuasively plausible argument—with some empirical illustration—not empirical proof. But, the fact that this analysis has been about conceptual construction does not mean that its inherently immaterial subject is unimportant. The subject is nothing less than the

way in which we conceive of the strategic world and, as a consequence, the intellectual order we choose to impose. Such conceptualization and ordering play a critical role in our education for strategic action.

At the outset of this enquiry a four-part master argument was advanced for examination. Specifically, it was argued that: (1) it is a mistake to categorize challenges as either irregular or traditional; (2) the addition of a third large basket of strategic phenomena, termed hybrid challenges and wars, is not a significant improvement on the original “big two”; (3) the path to strategic conceptual health leads back to unified theory covering statecraft (challenges), war, and strategy; and, (4) theory construction for particular strategic challenge (by geography, technology, intensity, *inter alia*) can only be undertaken in relative – and downstream, consequently practical – intellectual safety when it is conducted under the overall authority of the single general theory (e.g., of strategy).

The argument has been considered in some detail, and occasionally pressed dangerously close to its limits in the interest of clarity. Given that much of the text has had to be theoretical, even rather abstract and apparently ethereal, it is appropriate that I should make some effort to offset the unavoidable abstraction thus far, by offering conclusions and recommendations that are as specific and unambiguous as this conceptual subject permits.

1. *Clarity in definition matters greatly.* It may be fashionable and expedient to deploy fuzzy blurring descriptors like “complex” or “limited,” but the price one pays in confusion for such apparent sophistication is likely to be heavy. More or less, complexity is a structural reality in all strategic endeavors, but does it assist the understanding of war? The use of popular

adjectives demonstrates the currency of one's professional expertise, but typically it risks blurring that which ought to be clear. Whatever the politicians may be claiming, if the bad guys are shooting at me, then I am engaged in warfare, which is *prima facie* evidence for my involvement in a war.

2. *The virus of encyclopedism in definitions should be recognized and resisted.* There is a role and a place for illustrative detail, but that role and place is not in a definition. Social science is content to tolerate exceptions to its theories—it is satisfied with explanations covering most cases, not each and every one. In the definition of strategic concepts, more detail inevitably promotes less clarity and therefore less understanding. William of Occam should be regarded as the patron saint of wordsmithing for strategic conceptualization.

3. *Ideas matter: Concepts for theory have practical consequences.* The way in which we behave strategically is not dictated strictly by the way in which we conceptualize its challenges and intellectually order our possible responses, but our concepts educate our perception and interpretation of events, and they find expression in the doctrine that shapes our behavior.<sup>52</sup> Of course, strategic behavior should be adaptable to unanticipated events, but frequently it is not. Strategic and military culture can and does change, but at any one time it is going to help mold action now in ways organized doctrinally in the light shed by authoritative strategy concepts.

4. *General theory educates for the sound construction of particular theories.* The general theory of strategy (and of statecraft and war) provides the conceptual foundations upon which particular theories (e.g., for COIN, CT, air power, cyber power, *inter alia*) can be constructed. COIN practitioners strive to do COIN in

ways and with means suitable to the case at issue, but their efforts are located conceptually in the context of general theory. Conceptual efforts focused on Afghanistan should be able to draw upon theory and its wisdom from other cases of strategic endeavor, including but not confined to COIN. With some persuasive justification, it can be claimed that there are no new stages upon which strategic history is played; there is only one, with the furniture endlessly rearranged. I suspect that actors and even plots also have more continuities than are perceived in journalistic judgments that are light on historical perspective. While the detail of strategic history is always in motion, its grander narratives are not. This is why Sun Tzu, Thucydides, and Clausewitz, remain the basis of a sound education in statecraft and strategy.

5. *The categorization of challenges according to taste and fashion may be regrettable, but if in practice it is unavoidable, its potential to cause harm can be minimized by contextualization.* To illustrate: Today there is an ever-more-urgent need for cyberpower to be understood so that it can be explained to those who must use it strategically. However, the necessary understanding of the digital realm cannot be achieved wholly self-referentially. The theory needed for cyberpower must, simultaneously, be fully respectful both of the evolving “grammar” of cyber- and cyber-enabled warfare, as well as of the authority of the general theory that governs all strategic endeavors.<sup>53</sup> Air power, cyber power, special operations forces, and arguably even nuclear weapons, have not compelled a rewriting of the *general* theory of strategy (or of statecraft or war). For each individual strategic historical case — Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, *inter alia* — there has to be particular adaptable evolving strategies that are mani-

festations of a general understanding and explanation of strategic history that draws upon the evidence of the ages.

6. *Unwise categorization encourages the tacticization, which means the neglect, of strategy.* Exclusively packaged categories of perceived strategic challenges or threats have the nontrivial potential to mislead us into fighting the wrong war in the absence of functioning navigation aids. If we sally forth to wage traditional war, we can find—indeed, recently have found—that there are nontraditional kinds of warfare that our initial victory, alas, did not cover. If we organize and deploy to conduct irregular war, we find our troops exposed in unduly widely distributed small packets to traditional forms of assault by enemies seeking victories in combats of modest scale. And if we organize and deploy for hybrid war, prudently we are ready for what should comprise the full range of menaces available to our foes. But this category of war, or warfare, is not sufficiently and meaningfully distinguishable from war and warfare conceived and approached as a whole. If the defense community is educated as it should be conceptually and historically to understand that war and warfare are rarely option-pure by exclusive intellectual type, it is difficult to see what the hybrid concept contributes that is useful. Since categorical creativity is unstoppable in a community peopled by gifted theorists with careers to advance, at the least we can strive to limit the self-harming consequences of imprudent conceptualization by insisting upon the contextual discipline of general theory. Soldiers should understand that occasionally they will be sent to war on behalf of the nation. The fact that some of our theorists wish to classify this or that case as being mainly irregular, or asymmetric, or hybrid,

or compound, or anything else of like ilk, ought not to be allowed to impede our strategic efforts. We should seek to avoid being taken hostage by our own problematic concepts in a grim intellectual facsimile of the Stockholm Syndrome.

*7. Because all manner of challenges/threats are possible and even probable in the future, it cannot be prudent for Americans to employ a strategic conceptual structure that could well result in the limiting of their ability to understand and respond effectively to under-anticipated events. To identify authoritatively by doctrinal fiat that challenges come in two, three, or more categories, which is to say classes, of events sufficiently exclusive as to justify distinctive labeling, is to construct conceptual walls that are certain to be substantially fictitious. A mind educated in strategic and other history and that is steeped in the general strategic theory that has stood the test of time—including shifting intellectual fashion, events, and focused criticism—does not need to be guided by categorical conceptualization. When we choose to fight, we fight in attempt to win the war, not the irregular, traditional, hybrid, or asymmetrical war. Furthermore, our military effort has to be conceived as a component of grand strategy, with its many extra-military elements. And that grand strategy is an exercise in continuing statecraft, which includes the necessity to ensure adequate domestic support. The particular character of grand strategic and military effort that is required to meet a unique strategic challenge will depend in good part on the U.S. policy determination that action is desirable. In many cases, the character of the challenge perceived by American policymakers will not dictate the full character of the American response; at least it should not do so.*

The core of the argument of this monograph is expressed – certainly it is suggested – in the following words by Antulio J. Echevarria that I am pleased to deploy as my Parthian shot:

The many definitions of types of war and the various descriptors we attach to the term “war” suggest we have not yet transitioned from a way of battle to a way of war. We still have difficulty thinking of war holistically as something multifaceted and dynamic.<sup>54</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 578.

2. Antulio J. Echevarria II, “American Strategic Culture: Problems and Prospects,” in Hew Strachan and Sibylle Scheipers, eds., *The Changing Character of War*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 438.

3. W. Alexander Vacca and Mark Davidson, “The Regularity of Irregular Warfare,” *Parameters*, Vol. XLI, No. 1, Spring 2011, p. 18.

4. Brian McAllister Linn, *The Echo of War: The Army’s Way of War*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 1-2. Some helpful explanation for the recent and current conceptual confusion can be found in Paul K. David and Peter A. Wilson, *Looming Discontinuities in U.S. Military Strategy and Defense Planning: Colliding RMAs Necessitate a New Strategy*, Occasional Paper, Santa Monica, CA: National Defense Research Center, RAND, 2011.

5. I endeavor to present and explain the general theory of strategy in *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010.

6. It is a general rule that recent and current events appear far more novel at their time of occurrence than they do when the passage of years enables their assessment in some historical perspective. If a defense community is not inclined to be respectful of historical narratives, it maximizes the prospects of its failing to contextualize new developments usefully. In strategic matters, there is little that is genuinely new beyond the details. Nearly all contemporary strategic phenomena have analogically helpful historical near precedents.

7. The British soldier-theorist Charles E. Callwell famously wrote in his classic study of "small wars" that "[t]heory cannot be accepted as conclusive when practice points the other way; the objections of the square are manifest, but it has scores of times fulfilled its purpose." *Small Wars: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers*, 1906; Novato, CA: Presido Press, 1990, p. 270. Callwell noted that the infantry "square," providing all-round defense in close order, was an essential tactical option as late as the 1890s in some colonial warfare.

8. "The United States is a big, lumbering, pluralistic, affluent, liberal, democratic, individualistic, materialistic (if not hedonistic), technologically supremely sophisticated society. Our military strategy should and, indeed, must be built upon these facts. The way we fight necessarily will reflect the way we live." Samuel P. Huntington, *American Military Strategy*, Policy Papers in International Affairs, No. 28, Berkeley, CA: Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, p. 13.

9. I develop this and other relevant ideas about education in strategy for strategic practice in my *Schools for Strategy: Teaching Strategy for 21st Century Conflict*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2009.

10. With specific reference to the focus of concern in this analysis, I have been guilty of endorsing the still-quite-popular and distinctive binary categorization of warfare into allegedly regular and irregular boxes. I can claim some prescience when I wrote that "[t]he first feature [about future warfare] we can predict with high confidence is that there is going to be a blurring, perhaps we should say a further blurring, of warfare categories. The convenient binary distinction between regular and irregular



warfare frequently is going to be much less clear in practice than it is conceptually or in law." Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare*, London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005, p. 199. What I should have said is that warfare should be treated as a unified body of phenomena with a single defining concept, not as comprising a number of categories, no matter how allegedly blurred. It is worth noting that my tentative reaching in 2005 for a way to express the porosity of the regular (traditional) and irregular categories would seem to have been not dissimilar in nature and character from those of Frank G. Hoffman in the same period. Hoffman embraced and developed the concept, now familiar, of hybrid wars and warfare, which I do not endorse on the terms that he has advanced, but we appear to have shared a root epiphany. See Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid War*, Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007. I found Hoffman's work outstandingly thoughtful and useful, even though I do not endorse the hybrid label for reasons made explicit in my text here.

11. For the persuasive and useful concept of cultural inertia, I am grateful to Jeannie L. Johnson and Matthew T. Berrett, "Cultural Topography: A New Research Tool for Intelligence Analysis," *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 55, No. 2, Extracts, June 2011, p. 1. On the cultural dimension to strategy, see Lawrence Sondhaus, *Strategic Culture and Ways of War*, Abingdon, MA: Routledge, 2006; Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Jeffrey A. Larsen, eds., *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Echevarria, "American Strategic Culture"; and Colin S. Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy*, Chap. 3, forthcoming.

12. Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes*, London, UK: C. Hurst, 2009; and Echevarria, "American Strategic Culture." Both shoot a few innocents in their tough critiques, but overall they are fair.

13. This is a reasonable interpretation of Clausewitz, *On War*, especially p. 77.

14. See Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957;

Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War Revisited*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979; and Morton H. Halperin, *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, New York: Wiley, 1963.

15. See Steven Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 1982, pp. 83-113.

16. Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*, New York: Praeger, 1965.

17. Clausewitz's liking for trinities is well noted in Hew Strachan, *Clausewitz's On War: A Biography*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, pp. 85-87. In *The Strategy Bridge*, I offer an Appendix D, "Potent Trinities: Fourteen Skeleton Keys of Theory for the Strategist," pp. 278-283.

18. Frank G. Hoffman's recent writings provide the best entrée into the strategic conceptual world of postulated hybridity. From a healthy choice of offerings, see his *Conflict in the 21st Century*, and for a more recent venture, "Future Threats and Strategic Thinking," *Infinity Journal*, No. 4, Fall 2011, pp. 17-21. Both neologisms and cross-disciplinary borrowings of key defining concepts need to be received with caution—the latter, in particular—because ideas borrowed from one discipline and for their merit in another can carry some baggage of popular meaning that may mislead. Overall, there is the peril of anachronism. Hybridity is an entirely respectable idea in biology and zoology; it refers to mixed parentage (different species) resulting in a new species of plant or animal. When transferred to strategy in the case of interest here, it means a war and its warfare with mixed parentage among types. Dictionaries do not specify required percentages of distinctive strains of provenance for new speciation. This seemingly pedantic point may matter for strategic studies, given that many conflicts, at any one time, will show activity heavily favoring only one or two, among a theoretical range of choices including at least several more types of warfare. My point is that dictionaries provide quite permissive definitions of hybridity. This could be important if one seeks to argue for this concept having seriously exclusive defining potency and therefore practical utility.

19. See the somewhat autobiographical writings of Australian anthropologist-soldier and COIN theorist-practitioner, David J. Kilcullen, especially his "Counter-Insurgency Redux," *Survival*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Winter 2006-07, pp. 111-130; and *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, London, UK: C. Hurst, 2009. Kilcullen strays occasionally, though understandably, into undue enthusiasm for anthropology in relation to COIN, but on careful reading his theorizing and advice are tolerably well hedged and nuanced.

20. Gian P. Gentile is the leading proponent of the thesis that the basic direction taken by American COIN theory and much COIN practice in the second half of the 2000s has been either astrategic or even inadvertently anti-strategic. See Gian P. Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 3, Autumn 2009, pp. 15-17; and "The Death of American Strategy," *Infinity Journal*, No. 3, Summer 2011, pp. 14-16.

21. For an enlightening recent major report on American professional military education, see U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, *Another Crossroads? Professional Military Education Two Decades After the Goldwater-Nichols Act and the Skelton Panel*, Committee Print 111-4, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2010, especially pp. 49-93 on "Developing Strategists."

22. Clausewitz, *On War*, Chap. 2, "On the Theory of War."

23. Linn, *The Echo of Battle*, pp. 1-2, 233-243.

24. For a classic treatment, see Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1974.

25. Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, New York: Sentinel, 2011, pp. xiii-xv, is essential, as well as amusing.

26. John A. Lynn advances the claim for the superiority of mind over muscle convincingly in his *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003; a position endorsed in Gray, *Perspectives on Strategy*.

27. Notwithstanding its Rimland geopolitical position, meaning that it is not easily landlockable as was both Germany (twice) and then the late and unlamented USSR, the PRC today and even tomorrow is all but hopelessly overmatched in maritime, especially naval, strength by its possible enemies. The potential globality of Chinese power and influence is highly vulnerable to hostile maritime effort. This is not a particularly fashionable view today, but then neither is geostrategic analysis as a necessary partner to geopolitical considerations. On the subject of the Eurasian Rimland, the founding text is Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1944.

28. Regarding America's internal frontier, there was an exception to the unpopularity of warfare against nonstate foes. Unsurprisingly, Americans living precariously within combat reach of their sometimes bellicose Native American neighbors were rarely seriously averse to (strategically effective) warfare against non-state enemies. The relevant literature is huge, but I have found the following works especially helpful: Reginald C. Stuart, *War and American Thought: From the Revolution to the Monroe Doctrine*, Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1982; Armstrong Starkey, *European and Native American Warfare, 1675-1815*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998; William B. Kessel and Robert Wooster, eds., *Encyclopedia of Native American Wars and Warfare*, New York: Checkmark Books, 2005; Pekka Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008; and Nathaniel Philbrick, *The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull and the Battle of the Little Big Horn*, London, UK: The Bodley Head, 2010.

29. "Small war is a term which has come largely into use of late years and which is admittedly somewhat difficult to define. Practically it may be said to include all campaigns other than those where both the opposing sides consist of regular troops." Callwell, *Small Wars*, p. 21. In its doctrinal manual of 1940, the U.S. Marine Corps advised that:

The term "Small War" is often a vague name for any one of a great variety of military operations. As applied to the United States, small wars are operations undertaken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory

for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation. U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, United States Marine Corps, 1940, Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, no date given, p. 21. The official American tendency to indulge in definitional prolixity is all too evident in this quoted cultural gem.

30. See John P. Rose, *The Evolution of U.S. Army Nuclear Doctrine, 1945-1980*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980; Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army between Korea and Vietnam*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986; and especially Linn, *The Echo of Battle*, Chap. 6.

31. Clausewitz in *On War* can be interpreted in different ways, depending upon the part(s) of the book most favored for one's purpose, and the choice of translation. Also, it needs to be said that although Clausewitz should be treated with more respect as a theorist of war than any of his competitors down the ages, the goal is not to secure the most accurate grip upon Clausewitz's meaning writing in the 1820s, but rather to achieve understanding for explanation for us today, with such helpful guidance as we can reasonably draw from *On War*. Clausewitz distinguishes between absolute and limited wars (p. 489), and indeed he suggests that two kinds of limited war are possible: "offensive war with a limited aim, and defensive war" (p. 602). While he emphasizes the difference between wars with the character of those waged by Napoleon for clear decision via the enemy's military overthrow and wars with more limited aims, one should not make too much of that distinction. When Clausewitz writes about absolute war, he can be referring to wars of maximum strategic ambition, or, confusingly to the unwary, to war's inherent dynamically reciprocal violent nature. He knew, and said, that every age had its own limiting conditions. What we should take from *On War* in this central matter is that all wars have some potential to spiral violently in obedience to their own conflictual logic and grammar, while it is sensible to recognize that every war will in several senses be limited; it is a question of degree. "Limited" is a notably inclusive adjective. The proposition that wars occur in two forms, absolute or limited, is not a safe or intelligent reading of Clausewitz. Porter, *Military Orientalism*, is excellent on war having "a discipline of its own," and—following Clausewitz, who better!—in noting

that “as a duel there is the reciprocal competitive nature of war itself,” pp. 65, 170.

32. See John Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

33. Bernard Brodie, *Escalation and the Nuclear Option*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966. Brodie sensibly poured cold strategic water on the prospects for a non-nuclear defense of NATO-Europe that was popular at his time of writing in the mid-1960s.

34. Insurgents who are out of power, but wish to be in power, are certainly stateless at present, but they are usually classed as irregular combatants even though their political ambition is thoroughly regular, to achieve power and then authority in a state.

35. An interesting examination of a relevant though problematic concept is Roger W. Barnett, *Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to U.S. Military Power*, Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2003.

36. Colin S. Gray, “Strategic Thought for Defence Planners,” *Survival*, Vol. 52, No. 3, June-July 2010, pp. 159-178, argues for the prudence in adaptability.

37. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Samuel B. Griffith, trans., Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 84.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

39. See Colin S. Gray, *Understanding Airpower: Bonfire of the Fallacies*, Research Paper 2009—3, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University, Air Force Research Institute, March 2009, pp. 45-51; David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City*, Occasional Paper, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, Arroyo Center, 2011, p. 18, makes a persuasive case for the high military utility of “Heavy forces—i.e., tanks and infantry fighting vehicles” as “key elements of maneuver in complex terrain [e.g., urban areas]; they are survivable, lethal, and precise.”

40. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89.

41. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War*, Robert B. Strassler, ed., New York: The Free Press, 1996, p. 43.

42. See A. J. Coates, *The Ethics of War*, Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997; and Christopher Coker, *Ethics and War in the 21st Century*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008.

43. I was particularly insistent on contextual analysis in my *Another Bloody Century*, Chap. 2.

44. Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd Ed., London, UK: Frank Cass, 2001, pp. 353-360.

45. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Toward an American Way of War*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2004.

46. Harold R. Winton, "An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 6, December 2011, pp. 853-877.

47. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century*, p. 11.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

49. Emily Spencer, *The Difficult War: Perspectives on Insurgency and Special Operations Forces*, Kingston, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2009. The "difficult war" is more than casually reminiscent of Max C. Manwaring's edited book, *Uncomfortable Wars: Toward a New Paradigm of Low Intensity Conflict*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991. I predict with high confidence that neither difficult war theory nor uncomfortable war theory either have, or should have, a future. They fail every test for a useful strategic concept, except that of being memorable.

50. See Montgomery McFate, "The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 38, 3rd quarter, 2005, pp. 42-48; and Johnson and Berrett, "Cultural Topography."

51. Historian John France advances this argument in his *Perilous Glory: The Rise of Western Military Power*, New Haven, CT:

Yale University Press, 2011. The theory that man is evolving psychologically with a changing mental condition ever less inclined toward violence is a popular fallacy because it lacks empirical traction in both scientific physical and historical evidence.

52. Lynn, *Battle*, is particularly helpful on the importance of ideas as an influence on behavior.

53. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 605.

54. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Preparing for One War and Getting Another*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2010, p. 25.





**U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE**

**Major General Gregg F. Martin  
Commandant**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**STRATEGIC STUDIES INSTITUTE**

**Director  
Professor Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr.**

**Director of Research  
Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II**

**Author  
Dr. Colin S. Gray**

**Director of Publications  
Dr. James G. Pierce**

**Publications Assistant  
Ms. Rita A. Rummel**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**Composition  
Mrs. Jennifer E. Nevil**

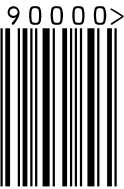


U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE



FOR THIS AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS, VISIT US AT  
[StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil](http://StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil)

ISBN 1-58487-520-8



[This Publication](#)



[SSI Website](#)



[USAWC Website](#)